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Iran Documents Give Hint of a CIA Enterprise

First of a series

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On an evening in late August, 1979, a few months before Iranian militants seized the American Embassy in Tehran, a tall, slim man, slightly gray at the temples, would walk out the front door of the Tehran Intercontinental Hotel, carrying a bright orange Lufthansa flight schedule in his left hand. West to the corner, then south on a street called Amir Abad.

If anyone checked, the passport and credit cards in his pocket would identify him as an American businessman based in Europe, William A. Foster, representing Carver Associates, a Philadelphia consulting firm. If authorities checked with Philadelphia, Don Meads, president of Carver Associates, was prepared to vouch for Foster.

In addition to his business affairs, Meads is active in foreign policy issues. Two years later, as president of the Philadelphia World Affairs Council, he would host President Reagan for a major foreign policy address.

Only Foster wasn't quite real. Meads knew him as Guy W. Rutherford, a CIA officer provided "deep cover" by Carver Associates. In fact, he wasn't Rutherford either. His real name is Vernon A. Cassin, a now-retired CIA officer active in Middle East espionage for nearly two decades.

The audacious script was written at CIA headquarters in Langley, and, half a world away in Iran, the players followed their parts faithfully.

These precise details of a major spy enterprise, derived from CIA documents, provide a rare glimpse inside the operational realities of America's intelligence agency.

To American newspaper readers, Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr was known only as another leader in the Iranian revolution, a small, bespectacled man with a drooping moustache who spouted anti-U.S. rhetoric in tune with his leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

To the CIA, Bani-Sadr seemed a promising recruit.

At the next intersection, Foster-Rutherford-Cassin was picked up by a bright yellow sedan whose driver he knew by the code name Paquin. Paquin was Thomas Ahern, the CIA station chief in Tehran. As they drove through the city, Cassin delivered the message that Langley wanted to hear: the initial contact had been made to cultivate and recruit Bani-Sadr, prominent leader of the 15-man Revolutionary Council, as an informer or agent.

Identified in cable traffic only as "SDLure-1," Bani-Sadr ostensibly would be "hired" as a paid consultant to Carver Associates, but the real purpose would be to secure an extremely well-placed source inside Khomeini's revolution. In time, Bani-Sadr was elected president of Iran.

Ahern cabled the results to CIA headquarters: "Although the meeting was brief there were a sufficient number of indicators to suggest that there may be an opening to obtain subject's cooperation."

But none of the above will be news to U.S. adversaries.

For many months, these facts have been available to Soviet intelligence and to anyone on the streets of Tehran willing to purchase a set of 13 volumes of U.S. secret documents.

Hundreds of highly sensitive documents were captured and reconstructed after the 1979 embassy takeover, then published selectively in paperback with commentaries in Persian for popular consumption.

Other documents reportedly have not been deciphered or have been withheld because they might embarrass Islamic clerics the militants support. Although those published do not support the more egregious conspiracy theories of the militants, they have aroused Iranian distrust of the United States. Many Iranians reportedly assume that documents destroyed would have provided even stronger evidence of subversion.

in the episode would respond to requests for interviews. The CIA likewise declined to comment.

But the agency's recruiting effort did have one unintended result: it helped drive Bani-Sadr from power.

After the embassy takeover, it took the Iranian militants many months to sort out the captured papers and piece together hundreds of documents which had been shredded by embassy staffers in the final hours of the assault on Nov. 4, 1979.

Then the militant students had to translate the papers and figure out the coded meanings. By the spring of 1981, when Bani-Sadr was the moderate president of Iran battling radical clerics for popular support, the captured U.S. documents were used in the political struggle against him.

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